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Ahead of February 4, a cancer survivor examines how treating mental health alongside the tumour is becoming a critical pillar of oncology in India

WORLD CANCER DAY

MAKING ROOM FOR THE MIND

Sanjukta Sharma

Every family today knows someone with cancer. It is no longer a disease that happens to an ageing parent or relative – there's no distant morbid otherness.

In early 2018, after my treatment for Stage 3 ovarian cancer, I was told that I had reached the triumphant stage called NED (No Evidence of Disease). It was a rare, positivity-fuel day. The baldpate, oppressed bone marrow, and thousands of niggling pains in my body be damned, I thought; the stakes were high, I wanted to live, and I ought to try everything.

The cancer experience is singularly brutal and isolating. Our fundamental building blocks, the body's cells, go rogue, and addressing all parts of my being made profound sense, including my mental and emotional health. Unlike now, psycho-oncology was not a formal part of oncology departments at all hospitals in 2018. So, I decided to call Vijay Bhat.

Bhat, co-author of *My Cancer Is Me: The Journey From Illness To Wholeness* (2013), is founder of the organisation Cancer Awakens in Mumbai. Colon cancer in his early 50s brought the former CEO of ad agency Ogilvy & Mather back to India. Now, he is a cancer survivor of 25 years – a "cancer thriver" in wellness-oncology speak.

Registering for the NGO's mental-emotional support programme was a turning point. The "new normal" was tougher than I had imagined. Part of what Cancer Awakens sherpa, and now my friend and a mentor, Anamika Chakravarty did with me was psycho-oncology. She addressed my emotional and mental stressors, identified in various aspects of my life through an elaborate set of questionnaires, over 23 sessions. I found direction to seek tailor-made solutions from experts. (Bhat himself had combined various models of western mental health solutions as well as ancient healing methods, which he had rigorously researched and experimented with.) Self-awareness acquired new meaning after this slow, empowering experience. I embraced therapy not just as a cancer survivor, but for all my existential coils.

Now, nine years later, ahead of World Cancer Day on February 4, an ad selling a psycho-oncology certification course just popped up on my mobile phone.

At last, a formal field

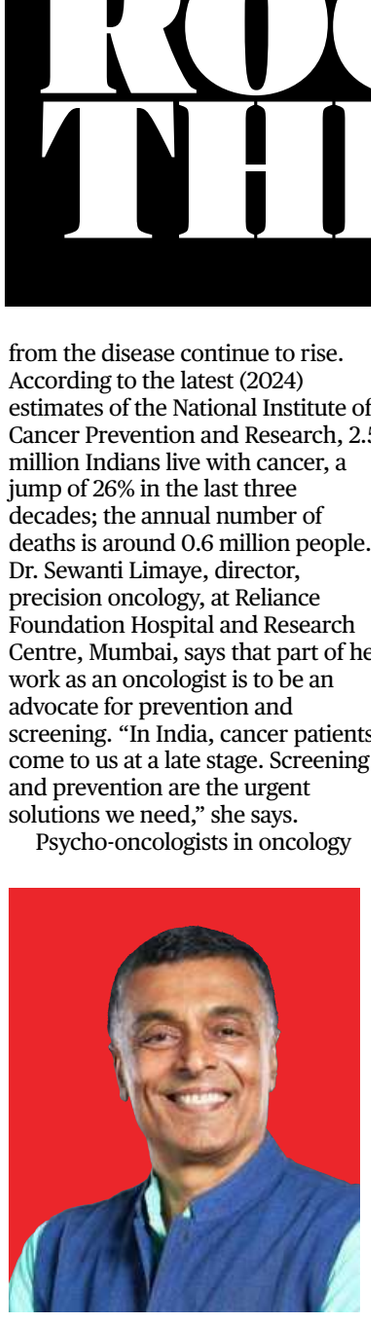
Studies point to breast cancer incidences in Indian women even in their 20s. Colon cancers in younger populations and lung cancers in non-smokers are rising, too.

Poornima Sardana, 37, who is pursuing a PhD in medical humanities in Melbourne and lives between Delhi and Melbourne, was diagnosed with ovarian cancer when she was 29. "There wasn't a psycho-oncologist available when I started my treatment, but I went for therapy after my treatment," she says. "Usually, cancer takes a toll on the mind once the treatment is done and the support systems start becoming faint. That's when the changes in the body and a sense of loss hit hard."

In India, psycho-oncology is finally carrying weight, alongside the changes in the last decade in the cancer treatment landscape, the eco-systems of care and support, and cancer's burden on the population. While treatment options for different kinds of cancers, especially the most common ones – lung, oral cavity and breast – have expanded, the number of new cases and deaths from the disease continue to rise. According to the latest (2024) estimates of the National Institute of Cancer Prevention and Research, 2.5 million Indians live with cancer, a jump of 26% in the last three decades; the annual number of deaths is around 0.6 million people. Dr. Sewanti Limaye, director, precision oncology, at Reliance Foundation Hospital and Research Centre, Mumbai, says that part of her work as an oncologist is to be an advocate for prevention and screening. "In India, cancer patients come to us at a late stage. Screening and prevention are the urgent solutions we need," she says.

Psycho-oncologists in oncology departments may not have far-reaching impact on the burden itself, but it is still a breakthrough. Addressing the mind-body axis isn't new in cancer care – it was just outside of hospitals, and excluded from oncologists' prescriptions. Cancer coaching was a domain usually of survivors, who train in holistic or psychological modalities and set up practices of their own to help the newly diagnosed or the new survivor.

Most big hospitals are beginning to embrace psycho-oncology as one part of a multi-disciplinary approach. Dr. Rituparna Ghosh, senior clinical psychologist, Apollo Hospitals, Navi Mumbai, says, "Psycho-oncology supports patients in preserving identity and dignity during illness. It helps individuals to navigate changes in body image, sexuality, fertility, professional roles, and family dynamics. For patients with advanced disease, psychological care facilitates meaning-making, emotional closure, and discussions around goals of care." Apollo Hospitals run 14 specialised cancer care centres across India and each one has psycho-oncologists.



Immunotherapy is the great new frontier of cancer treatment... and that happens when we address the whole spectrum of physical, mental, emotional, relational and spiritual aspects

VIJAY BHAT
Founder, Cancer Awakens, Mumbai

Adapting to challenges

Every patient has a different challenge, and a psycho-oncologist has to adapt depending on what the stage of diagnosis is, their age, and the kind of mental discomfort the patient or survivor is experiencing. Take the most common form of therapy in psycho-oncology, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). After it is recommended as part of the treatment protocol, the patient and their family, or the patient alone depending on the case, meets the psycho-oncologist, who has to build the patient's trust in therapy, understand and identify blocks or negative thought patterns, recommend activities and exercises to reframe those thoughts, and change mental-emotional outlook and behaviour.

In my trauma-informed therapy class, we would set a session's goal, work on techniques such as thought challenges, and be given homework. "Psychological intervention has a direct impact on treatment engagement," emphasises Apollo's Dr. Ghosh. "Patients who feel emotionally supported are more likely to attend appointments consistently, follow treatment recommendations, and communicate openly with their healthcare teams," she says.

Dr. Nikhil Himthani, a medical oncologist at MOC Cancer Care and Research Centre, New Delhi, affirms this shift. MOC is one of India's growing community-based cancer centres that specialises in chemotherapy and comprehensive oncology care. It has 25 branches pan-India and 19 psycho-oncologists across centres. "In the near future, psychological counselling will no longer be viewed as an optional add-on, but as a critical pillar of evidence-based oncology," says Dr. Himthani. "Recent data suggests that when we treat a patient's mind alongside the tumour, it impacts quality of life but also potentially leads to enhanced clinical outcomes."

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ILLUSTRATION: SRISHTI RAMAKRISHNAN

Choose your therapy

What psycho-oncology practice offers

- **Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT):** Helps patients identify and change distorted thoughts and behaviours related to their illness. Effective for reducing pain, anxiety, and depression.
- **Mindfulness-based interventions (MBSR/MBCT):** Increases emotional regulation through mindfulness-based cognitive therapy or stress reduction techniques.
- **Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT):** A process-oriented therapy that encourages accepting difficult emotions while committing to actions aligned with personal values. Particularly useful for fear of recurrence.
- **Supportive-Expressive Therapy:** A group or individual approach providing emotional support, reducing isolation, and allowing patients to express feelings about their diagnosis.
- **Meaning-centred psychotherapy:** Tailored for advanced cancer, this approach helps patients find meaning and purpose despite their illness.
- **Family and couples therapy:** Addresses the relational impact of cancer, improving communication and resolving conflicts within families.
- **Trauma-informed Therapy:** Patient-centred approach that shifts the question from "What's wrong with you?" to "What happened to you?", focusing on safety, trust, and empowerment.

IN CONVERSATION

'DENIAL IS ALWAYS RELATED TO FEAR'

Booker Prize-winning author George Saunders on his new novel, *Vigil*, a complex satire of corporate greed and moral culpability

Saurabh Sharma

The Booker Prize-winning author of *Lincoln in the Bardo* (2017) returns with another ghost story, *Vigil* (published by Bloomsbury). It doesn't mimic its predecessor though. Leveraging the ghost of a working-class woman, Jill 'Doll' Blaine, as the narrator, Saunders helps highlight the liminality between life and the afterlife.

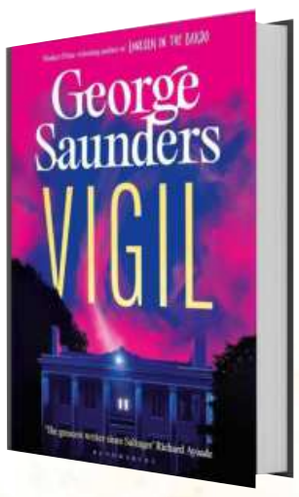
The story begins with Jill informing readers that she likes comforting the dead. However, she finds it challenging to do the same with oil tycoon K.J. Boone, who, even on his deathbed, refuses to feel guilt for his actions – be it interpersonal or environmental.

Served with a touch of humour, *Vigil* is a complex satire, making one confront their complicity in the face of events, irrespective of their positionality. Over a Zoom call, Saunders, master of brevity, shares the writing maxims he lives by and how he signals that he respects the reader's intelligence. Edited excerpts:

Question: *Would you say that the oil tycoon in* Vigil*, K.J. Boone, remains in denial because there's shame attached to what he took pride in, so he feigns ignorance by telling himself stories to protect his self-image?*
Answer: That's right, but he's a bit of an exaggerated case. Denial is always related to terror, fear. You live your life a certain way, and it's all tamped down in a box. If you lift that lid even a little bit, you want to push it down because you can't imagine doing that again.

There's this Tolstoy story, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. The protagonist feels that he did things the way they should've been done. But towards the end, when he gets sick, he's in a lot of physical and psychological pain because he can't admit that he may have lived the wrong way. His transformation begins when he finally says to god, 'okay, I accept maybe I didn't live the right way', and that's when things start to change.

We poor humans have these little mechanical minds to make our way through this vast universe, so we're always making stories and models that turn out to be inadequate to make sense of things. The way [Oliver] Cromwell says it, "I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible that you may be mistaken."



Q: *Was leveraging Jill's ghost as the narrator a way to render fluidity to navigate this space between surety, denial, and the 'I don't know' aspect of dealing with one's life?*
A: It gave me more inquisitors from a wider range of experience, surely. It's helpful to have a variety of viewpoints. Liberating, in fact. For example, if I had a man and a woman at the kitchen table, it'd be, 'Okay'. But if I put in the man's dead father, who's a communist, suddenly we've got a little fun. I'm always trying for organised cacophony in my fiction. The more voices, the better.

When I'm starting, I'm not thinking of any of this. It's always like I'm in a ship, trying to steer towards the choppiest water, the water with the most energy. How do I know where to go? It's never by thinking about themes or anything, but by feeling, 'Ok, I can do it'. So, I had a dead guy in bed, but do I want to just stay in his head the whole book? No. Then, what? I need a chorus. Who's there? His wife? Okay, but not that exciting. She's not going to be saying much. Now, when I start thinking about a working-class woman who died in 1976, I can see we'll have fun.

I'm always emphasising to my students that as much as writing is an intellectual and analytical act, it's as much to do with entertainment and instinct. I quote Flannery O'Connor often, "You can choose what you write but you can't choose what you make live."

George Saunders
(ZACH KRAHMER)

Q: *Making someone laugh is powerful, but it can only be achieved when there's this equitable space, with the oppressor and the oppressed on the same footing. What are your thoughts?*
A: I think what you just said is beautiful. That's exactly right. And I couldn't say it better. It's funny that the way to get a laugh is somewhat intuitive. It's a bit like being the class clown, knowing what to say, at precisely the right minute, and with the correct amount of spontaneity to get a laugh. If you hesitate even a second, the joke falls flat. But sometimes when you look at your text, you notice a denial or falseness in it, so just letting the text respond to its own falseness can be very funny.

Q: *Reading your chiselled work reminds me of Paul Auster, who called pruning a text 'raking'. In leaving bits out, you allow the readers to fill in the gaps. Are you conscious of this moment of co-creation while writing?*
A: I think the operating assumption is that you, my reader, are a little smarter than I am. A little more worldly. A little more of everything. So, I'm trying to appeal to you to keep listening to me, by going ahead in the text and making sure that it's worthy of you.

If you're on a bus, and someone's talking, being a little elliptical or quiet, you tend to lean in. I think that's the game: the writer has to get the reader to lean in. And omission is a really good way to suggest that a reader's intelligence is being respected, and I think she'd like it when she's asked to supply something.

That kind of an intimate back and forth, mechanically, for me, is a strange process to describe, but it can be simulated. The great article of faith I've been living by is that even the smallest adjustment feels like an increase in respect for the reader, so just take even that one extraneous word out. The effect becomes quite magical when you do this over and over and over again.

Q: *Could you tell us what the years of writing* Vigil *were like?*
A: During those years, some members of my extended family were facing health issues. And then, there was the difficult political situation over here [in the U.S.], which I feel very personally. All this made the writing schedule difficult.

I'm usually pretty buoyant and optimistic. But writing *Vigil* was, perhaps, less straightforwardly enjoyable because of everything going on, but, strangely, it might have been helpful for the book. Illness and fear of illness in my life added a bit of sobriety to the book because the events in the book felt more real to me.

The book froze in a place for a long time, but I think subconsciously I was doing a lot of fast dancing while it stayed there, so the result was, I think, a bit deeper. *Vigil* is a more complex book than I imagined it'd be at the outset.

The interviewer is a Delhi-based queer writer and culture critic.

Sharmin Segal plays the role of a poetry-loving courtesan in the Netflix series *Heeramandi*.

Love across centuries

What connects a 19th century courtesan-poet and an aspiring writer from contemporary times?

Meenakshi Shivram

The title of writer and historian Tarana Husain Khan's new novel, *The Courtesan, Her Lover and I*, echoes the name of the 1960s Hindi movie *Sahib, Bibi aur Ghulam*. The genre is that of docu-fiction. As the story progresses, you are reminded of *The Life of Jauhar Khan* by Vikram Sampath and Mirza Hadi Ruswa's *Umrao Jan Ada*. The narrative style is similar to the one in *The Hours* by Michael Cunningham and *Julie and Julia* by Julie Powell – where a story from the past gets reflected in the lives of people living in the present. This novel carries the weight of all these legacies impressively.

The first page draws you into the languorous spirit of a distant time and place carrying a faint fragrance called 'Rampur'. Rukmini/ Rukhsar, an erstwhile features writer writing about the food scene in Delhi, returns with her husband Faraz, belonging to the Afghan bloodline, to his quirky but classic hometown, Rampur, after a short stint in debonair Dubai. If you are looking for the intrigues of a Hindu-Muslim marriage, you will be disappointed – and thankfully, too. Rukmini is egged on to read about the lives of a Rampuri poet, Dagh Dehlvi, and his lady-love, Munni Bai Hijab, who lived towards the end of the 19th century. Dagh's life is available for access through his many letters. While researching for more information about Munni Bai Hijab, a courtesan who was also a poet, Rukmini's own life maps out against the contours of an ambivalent romance that lies buried in time and history.

Is love enough?

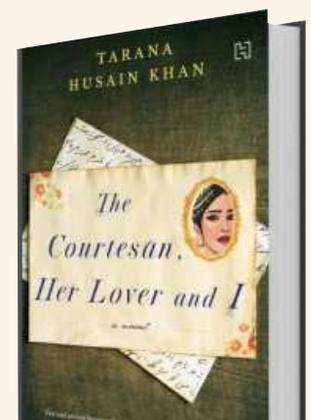
On the surface of the novel is the chequered love story of Munni Bai and Dagh. At the subterranean level is the story of Rukmini as she handles a husband who is habitually in debt and a teenage daughter who has taken a year's gap from studies to figure out what she wants to do. Soon, the surface and the subterranean mingle. Munni Bai's problematic relationship with her mother resonates with Rukmini's estrangement from her mother. Dagh plays Prof. Higgins to Munni Bai and Rukmini finds her tutor-muse in Daniyal.

"Writing is fragile – it needs to develop in quiet places," says Rukmini, as Munni Bai fears losing her clientele if she does not manufacture new lines regularly. She meets Dagh clandestinely while Rukmini meets Daniyal by pretending to go to the library. The cut-throat world of courtesans blends with the struggles of a first-time novelist trying to break through the gatekeeping in the publishing world. The stories of the two women become parallel commentaries on each other.

This novel leads you to several questions about human society. How does a culture that honoured courtesans in the guise of celebrating their artistic talents erase the trauma of their bodies being sold to the highest bidder? How could a courtesan who did not have a daughter continue to earn an income? Whether Umrao Jan Ada or Gauhar Jan or Munni Bai Hijab – what keeps them alive? Is it their poetry or their association with their male patrons? Does Dagh really love Munni Bai? Can a *tawaif* find true love? Does love exist? How does true love express itself – through poetry, silence, anger, rejection? Sometimes we stay on with people and call it love and, at other times, we walk away from people because we love them.

The choices we make

The author uses expressions, both Urdu words and Gen Z lingo, deftly. The translated poems – never an easy task – carry the essence but not the beauty of Urdu metrical compositions. The novel mentions multiple times that Rampur was established in 1774 by the Pathans. A deeper exploration of history could have added another dimension to the novel. Rampur was referred to as Aaraampur under the Nawabs and then as Haraampur when the British took over. Rampur's obscure past before 1774 could have matched Munni Bai's.



The Courtesan, Her Lover and I
Tarana Husain Khan
Hachette India
₹699

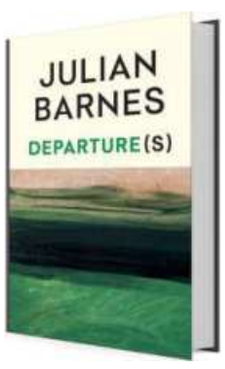
The novel also consolidates a demographic shift: Rupa Bajwa from Amritsar, Devika Rege from Pune, and now Tarana Husain Khan from Rampur. This band of gifted Indian women novelists writing in English is displacing the supremacy of the metropolis.

Capturing the delectable flavours of Awadhi food; delicately delineating characters, both real and fictional, especially that of the perceptive patriarch, Baba; portraying the contemporary struggles of keeping a family together; showcasing subtly the many layers that mark the disquiet of human choices – this is the novel you have been waiting for.

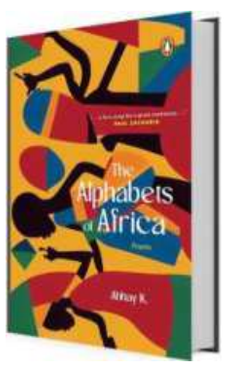
The reviewer is a Sahitya Akademi translation award winner.

BROWSER

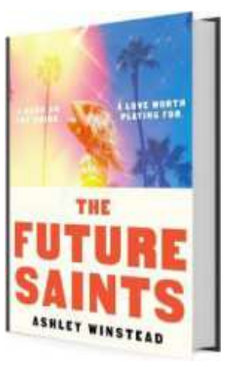
Departure(s)
Julian Barnes
Jonathan Cape
₹999
The Man Booker Prize-winning author's new novel, supposedly his last, is a stark yet indulgent take on love, longing and ageing. Barnes, who is battling a rare form of blood cancer, celebrated his 80th birthday last month. He has said that he will only pursue journalistic writing hereafter.



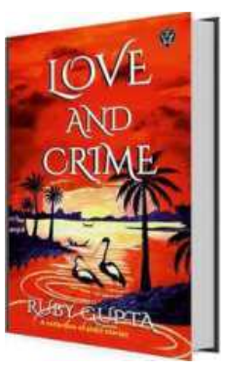
The Alphabets of Africa
Abhay K.
Penguin
₹399
The poet and diplomat's new book is a collection of 180 poems by him written during his travels in Africa. Abhay has also authored four works of non-fiction besides editing anthologies and translating classics, including Kalidasa's *Meghaduta* and *Ritusamhara*.



The Future Saints
Ashley Winstead
Bloomsbury
₹499
In this novel about sisterhood and friendship, the author tells the story of a failing music band and the ensemble cast surrounding it. A Ph.D in contemporary American literature, Winstead has a TikTok following for her romance novels.



Love and Crime
Ruby Gupta
Sabre & Quill
₹399
This collection of short stories promises romance with a dark twist. The author was writer-in-residence at the International Agatha Christie Festival in England in 2022. Her spy thriller, *The Secret of Leifeng Pagoda*, is currently being adapted to screen.



Cameron Crowe (GETTY IMAGES)

FROM A TEENAGE STOWAWAY

Cameron Crowe has lived an unbelievable life, and he shares his wide-eyed wonder with readers in his new memoir

Raja Sen

As a teenager meeting a girl for a first date, Cameron Crowe took her to meet David Bowie. Crowe smuggled marijuana seeds from Bob Marley's private stash. He moved in with The Eagles to write about them. The filmmaker has lived an unbelievable life, and he shares his wide-eyed wonder – and uniquely underage vantage point – in a new memoir, *The Uncool*. Reading it feels like reading the liner notes to a person.

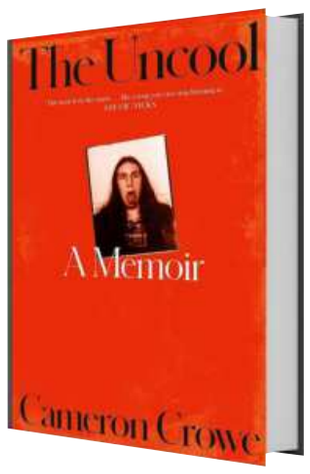
As someone who became a film critic entirely by accident, I had found gospel within Crowe's Oscar-winning autobiographical film *Almost Famous* (2000). Philip Seymour Hoffman, playing the critic Lester Bangs, warns the teenage protagonist: "You cannot make friends with the rockstars," he says. "They're going to buy you drinks, you're gonna meet girls, they're going to try to fly you places for free, offer you drugs. I know it sounds great. But these people are not your friends." This bit, mandatory for any critic surrounded by glitzy people, became my credo: "You have to make your reputation on being honest and unmerciful."

Cameron Crowe, bless his heart, is no critic.

He is, first and foremost, a fan, gaping at the people behind the songs that shaped his yearning and his youth, his teenage dreams and his turns of phrase. Too young to be allowed inside a bar, Crowe sat outside one to interview the great Kris Kristofferson. After "a short answer and a lengthy silence," he decided not to fill the void, and Kristofferson eventually spilled forth. "The more I didn't speak, the more he enjoyed our conversation."

Shaped by songs

Crowe listened and listened and listened. He got this from his mother Alice, to whom people of all ages freely confessed secrets. She was the one, future-telling and forward-thinking, who took him to the theatre, and to his first gigs, to see the end of Elvis and the start of Bob Dylan. Crowe was shaped by songs, some bequeathed by his late sister Cathy, songs that coloured in the life he hadn't experienced. "It was a door that opened for three minutes," he writes. "In the forbidden world there was no judgment. Only your own thoughts and secret desires, slashing through the atmosphere. And when the song was over, the door clanged shut again."



The Uncool
Cameron Crowe
Fourth Estate
₹670 (Kindle)

So, he listened, over and over. He learnt how not to judge. Life on the road with the Allman Brothers and Led Zeppelin was never going to be age-appropriate for a teenage stowaway, but Crowe behaved himself while, crucially, smiling at the debauchery around him. "The more I declined to share in somebody else's cocaine, the more popular I became."

His writing style is unassuming but lyrical. There's a touch of Steely Dan, even Paul Simon, in the way he gives people a psych-reading with first impressions: His sister's boyfriend "looked like summer and smelled like chlorine," Alice Cooper moved through the lobby "like a wrestler approaching the ring", Gram Parsons "arrived like a talented character actor enters a movie, with a secret behind his eyes." Like Bernie Taupin, Crowe finds cinematic emblems to crystallise key moments: he describes losing his virginity in a hotel room with a gaggle of groupies as "a blizzard of scarves."

Yes, Crowe really is the teenage journalist from *Almost Famous*. The superfan Penny Lane (played by Kate Hudson) is for real, and Frances McDormand unforgettably plays the relentless mother based on Crowe's own. He names names and gives out secrets in this memoir, and dreamers who love the film will be doubly enchanted. I myself have never been more envious of a memoirist, with Crowe spending 18 months with my god David Bowie to write a profile. For those of us of a certain playlist, *The Uncool* is essentially *Midnight In Paris*.

Cameron Crowe's films contain inspiration. *Jerry Maguire* begins with a manifesto against greed and money, *We Bought A Zoo* talks about 'twenty seconds of insane courage', *Elizabethtown* teaches us how a humiliating failure can be 'a souvenir' that resets your life

Finding his voice

As a journalist, I recognised both truth and romanticisation. When Crowe wrote about having his name featured on the cover of *Rolling Stone*, I remembered the overwhelming vote of confidence when my editor Nikhil Lakshman had first put my name on the Rediff homepage. I recognised the importance of finding a voice, the need to find your own boundaries, and how "sometimes you hear something so quotable that you can see the words in print in real time, right before your eyes."

The films of Crowe contain inspiration. *Jerry Maguire* (1996) begins with a manifesto against greed and money, *We Bought A Zoo* (2011) talks about "twenty seconds of insane courage', *Elizabethtown* (2005) teaches us how a humiliating failure can be "a souvenir" that resets your life. "To be a Zeppelin fan was to be part of a private club," he writes in *The Uncool*. "The music was like a joint passed between friends." With his films, Crowe passes us the wisdom that was handed to him.

This book lights it up.

The reviewer is a screenwriter, critic and columnist.

Star of the show

Thespian Anthony Hopkins provides an unblinkered look at a phenomenal career, and of making peace, somewhat, with his demons

Mini Anthikad Chhibber
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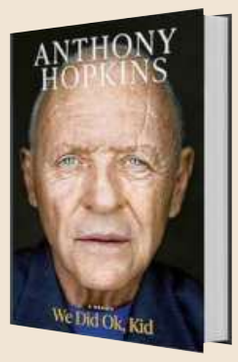


We Did Ok, Kid
Anthony Hopkins
Simon & Schuster
₹899

Before the Oscars, before Hannibal Lecter, before sobriety saved his life, there was a small boy on a windy Welsh beach. That is where Anthony Hopkins begins his searing memoir, *We Did Ok, Kid*. There is a touch of British writer Richmal Crompton's William Brown series of books in Hopkins' telling of his life story.

It might seem a strange connection given the harrowing details of the two-time Oscar winner's tough childhood, his struggles with alcohol, and his estrangement from his only daughter. However, there is an echo of William, the 11-year-old in Crompton's books, in the photograph of a cherubic three-year-old Hopkins on Aberavon Beach in Wales, smiling tentatively at his happy, dapper baker father, Richard Hopkins, that gave the book its name.

Hopkins writes that looking at the photograph now he is prompted to tell the little boy, "We did Ok, kid." That three-year-old boy who started crying when the lozenge his father's friend gave him fell into the sand, brings to mind the naughty school boy who unfailingly said "Villum" when his long-suffering mother asked him who he loved best.

Hopkins' vivid imagination, which caused his father to worry that he would never make anything of himself, is also reminiscent of William's many adventures in school and his beloved village, as is Hopkins' adoption of "dumb insolence" when faced with unreasonable authority.

Enter Shakespeare

We Did Ok, Kid follows Hopkins from his first encounter with the world of acting in Laurence Olivier's Hamlet – there is that memory of William doggedly declaiming "to be or not to be" while the teachers scramble to get him off stage, to studying in the Royal Welsh College of Music & Drama in Cardiff, two years of compulsory national service between 1958 and 1960, and studying at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA).

In between, he met Richard Burton, when Burton came to pick up Hopkins' neighbour, Bernice Evans, who was teaching Hopkins art, for a movie. The 10-year-old Hopkins was drawing a pirate (William again!) "wearing a red spotted bandana and brown leather boots." Burton saw the drawing and said with his blue eyes twinkling he liked the boots. Just before leaving drama school where he "lumbered through the two-year-course" Hopkins watched a performance of *Look Back in Anger* where Jimmy Porter was "played by an astonishing actor called Peter O'Toole."

It was during the RADA audition, when Hopkins played Iago, that he "suddenly knew how to play a diabolical villain... delivering a perfectly rational argument for terror. I gave the quietest delivery possible without being inaudible." It was a lesson he carried through to his Oscar-winning performance as Hannibal Lecter in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991).

Playing Hannibal Lecter

The book tells of Hopkins meeting the director Jonathan Demme and telling him of his plan to play Lecter "like HAL the computer" in *2001: A Space Odyssey*... Quiet and intimate... At once remote and awake."

Hopkins details the circularity of his life, from O'Toole getting him his first film part in *A Lion in Winter* to auditioning before Olivier for the National Theatre, "the same man who as a sad boy I'd seen on screen in *Hamlet*."

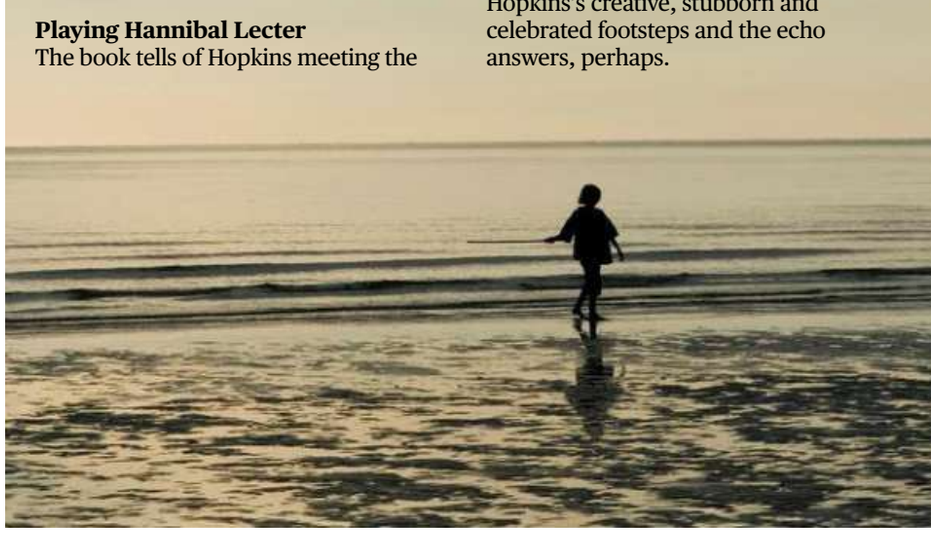
Olivier was the best kind of mentor to Hopkins, telling him, "You are the star of the show. You're the only one speaking at that moment," and "Nerves is vanity, you're wondering what people think of you? To hell with them! Just jump off the edge."

Even as Hopkins' star was rising, his personal life was a mess, holding grudges, brawling, getting lost in the bottle and walking out of his first marriage and infant daughter, "who always lit up" when he was in the room. Hopkins writes of these lows with a fierce honesty, of how he drove the car in a drunken blackout. That was one blackout too many, and "The craving to drink left me. That was eleven o'clock on 29 December 1975." And Hopkins has been sober since then.

The book does not feel self-indulgent, as Hopkins looks at his life and choices in that clear-eyed way that is irresistible. The 88-year-old thespian writes of his impatience with labels when discussing his wife Stella's belief that he may have Asperger's. "She is probably right," he says. Never having been formally diagnosed, and with the dislike of therapeutic jargon of a "stoic man from the British Isles," he prefers the "more meaningful designation: cold fish."

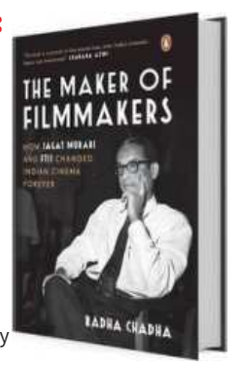
He is generous with praise for his fellow actors and directors even if he is not very convinced by CGI, writing, "I wouldn't say it's deadening but I prefer to be on location in a real place with real people." The book is quite funny too, with mentions of the superior acting prowess of Bart the bear and Steven Spielberg, who filmed Hopkins' U.S. citizenship ceremony, telling a woman in the audience that he "does bar mitzvahs as well!"

The book is peppered with photographs and closes with a section of Hopkins' favourite poetry. Special mention must be made of the audiobook, which is an aural treat read by Kenneth Branagh, with Hopkins reading the poetry. The book is an unblinkered look at a phenomenal career and an actor who has made peace, somewhat, with his demons. At the end of the book, one wonders if William Brown would have followed in Hopkins's creative, stubborn and celebrated footsteps and the echo answers, perhaps.



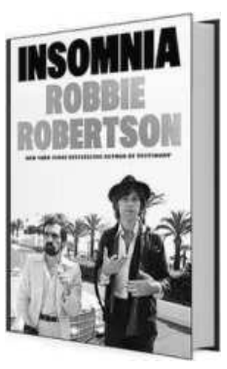
GETTY IMAGES

The Maker of Filmmakers: How Jagat Murari & FTII Changed Indian Cinema Forever



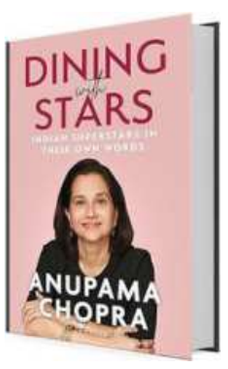
Radha Chadha
Viking India
₹1,299
Jagat Murari built the Film and Television Institute of India from the ground up. His daughter draws up a portrait of her father, a celebrated documentary filmmaker. It's also a story of how FTII turned out top talent.

Insomnia



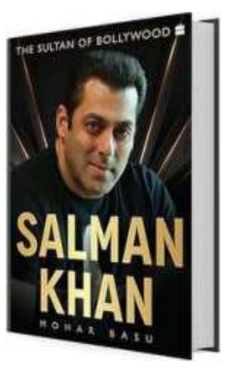
Robbie Robertson
Penguin
₹1,716 (Kindle)
Robbie Robertson produced music for Martin Scorsese's films for decades. They met when Scorsese directed *The Last Waltz*, the Band's farewell performance in 1976. Thus began a new phase of art, drugs and rock and roll. This is the story of a creative friendship between two titans.

Dining with Stars



Anupama Chopra
Bloomsbury
₹750
As a film critic, Chopra has been interviewing people from the industry for a long time. Her interviews are an archive of India's popular culture. This book compiles a selection of Chopra's conversations with some of India's superstars who talk about fame and its joys and perils.

Salman Khan: The Sultan of Bollywood



Mohar Basu
HarperCollins
₹599
With fan interviews, photos by Bollywood photographer, the late Pradeep Bandekar, and insights from long-time collaborators of Khan, Basu provides a glimpse into the life and work of a popular actor, controversies and all. Basu wonders what makes Khan a 'mass' hero, even at 60.

WORLD CANCER DAY

MAKING ROOM FOR THE MIND

CONTINUED FROM
» PAGE 1

Vivek Sharma, founder of Uhapo, a community-centric cancer care platform designed to support patients and caregivers through personalised assistance, says he is beginning to see real changes in patients after counselling has become routine in various hospitals, particularly in Mumbai's Tata Memorial Hospital. "Most insurance companies are including the holistic and psychological aspects of treatment now. I think the real tipping point will come when every oncologist in India prescribes psycho-oncology as a mandatory step in treatment," Sharma says.

Globally, Tata Memorial is widely recognised as the face of Indian cancer care. It hosts a World Health Organization (WHO)-affiliated regional cancer registry hub. In its packed corridors and OPD waiting rooms, despair and hope intertwine. According to the National Cancer Registry, 70,000 to 75,000 new patients arrive annually from across India at Tata Memorial – and that is possibly the reason why Dr. David Kissane, a pioneer in psycho-oncology who started work in the field in the 1990s at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, New York, points me to its psycho-oncology department. There, Dr. Jayita Deodhar and Dr. Savita Goswami, who were limited by time and permissions from the management to be interviewed, work with thousands of patients every year.

In the 20th century, cancer was feared as a death sentence... As its treatment could be debilitating and disfiguring, attention was drawn to the psychological responses and how to optimise coping

DR. DAVID KISSANE
Former president, International Psycho-Oncology Society, U.S.

Kissane, who has been a president of the International Psycho-Oncology Society in the U.S., and has written for its *Psycho-Oncology Journal*, says, in the first half of the 20th century, cancer was feared as a death sentence and talking about it was taboo. As its treatment with surgery, radiotherapy and chemotherapy could be debilitating and disfiguring, attention was drawn to the psychological responses and how to optimise coping.

Psycho-oncologists evaluate a patient to recommend specific treatment modalities, such as CBT or psycho-education. (GETTY IMAGES)

The need for cancer therapy

According to the 2025 study 'Psycho-oncology in India', published in *Journal of Cancer Policy*, a narrative review of psychosocial cancer care studies in India (2000-24) reported distress in 22%-62% patients, with the highest being in head and neck, and breast cancer. In an earlier 2021 mixed-method study in *Indian Journal of Palliative Care*, patients reported moderate to extreme distress (53.5%) with low referral/utilisation of psycho-oncology services (8.6%).

At Adyar Cancer Institute, Chennai, Dr. Divya Rajkumar points out that when she joined work as an psycho-oncologist in 2018, it was a new field in India. "It is still new, but we are seeing results. I have seen patients transform after going through sustained therapy during cancer treatment – even patients with terminal disease. Just to continue treatment and live becomes a challenge. For parents of paediatric cases especially, psycho-oncology can be very powerful. We also work in group settings, with patients' and survivors' support groups."

Dr. Rajkumar's job includes evaluating a patient when they get admitted for surgery or chemotherapy, and then using treatment modalities that would help them specifically, such as CBT or sometimes just psycho-education. "We have various ways to evaluate, including the use of a Distress Thermometer in hospital settings to measure their level of distress during treatment," she says. Today, she is one of seven psychologists in the hospital's psycho-oncology team.

For patients who want to go that extra mile, therapy often comes in the form of survivors who are living fulfilling lives after cancer. Actor Tannishtha Chatterjee, in remission after Stage 4 metastatic breast cancer, told me in between rehearsals for her play *Breast of Luck*, at G5A auditorium in Mumbai, "I haven't been to formal counselling, but what I have got as emotional and mental support from friends, colleagues and survivors, keeps me going. My therapy comes from my circle of sisters."

COURTESY APOLLO HOSPITALS

Psycho-oncology supports patients in preserving identity and dignity during illness... and facilitates meaning-making, emotional closure, discussions around goals of care

DR. RITUPARNA GHOSH,
Senior clinical psychologist, Apollo Hospitals, Navi Mumbai

During one of my first conversations with Bhat, he persuaded me that the first step to accepting a cancer diagnosis is to be able to embody this belief: "My cancer is me." Bhat is optimistic about the future of psycho-oncology. "This is a tacit recognition of the fact that the mind and body are indeed connected. It's great news. The key insight is that immunity is our best line of defence against the occurrence and recurrence of cancer. Immunotherapy is the great new frontier of cancer treatment, which basically strengthens the body's immune system to fight the cancer. Whatever can strengthen and optimise immunity, and we know that happens when we address the whole spectrum of physical, mental, emotional, relational and spiritual aspects, is worth doing."

Anybody gripped by cancer has this question uppermost on their minds: why me? After nine years in remission, I still grapple with it. I've been a guinea pig in post-cancer "inner healing", and finally gravitated to sustained trauma-informed therapy and ancient spiritual practices.

Over five years, I felt a shift in overall health and immunity when I found a sense of control and direction over my health and life. When you realise and accept that you could die in a few months or years, but that you will really live during that time – that's the light.

The writer is a Mumbai-based journalist and health advocate, a cancer survivor, and behind the preventive health and longevity media IP @the_slow_fix.

(Clockwise from left) Valentino with supermodels Naomi Campbell and Elle Macpherson; the designer flanked by models in 'Valentino red' gowns at his final show in 2008; and with actor Sarah Jessica Parker. (GETTY IMAGES)

TRIBUTE | 1932-2026

THE MAN FOR WHOM FASHION WAS JOY

Valentino Garavani, the last of the great 20th-century couturiers, leaves behind a legacy few can match

Tarun Tahiliani

Fashion designer Valentino Garavani once said, "I only know how to make a dress, decorate a house, and entertain." And boy, did he do it to perfection. Of course, if anyone said this today, they would be endlessly trolled. But that was a different time. And it seems like the inevitable tsunami of age is wiping the slate of history clean of its most spectacular players of that generation: Valentino, Giorgio Armani, (French designer) Jacqueline de Ribes, and many more.

Once, there was a 'pace' for perfection: less was made, more was considered, and everything endured. Valentino was one of its last bastions, a designer from a legacy of refined elegance. The idea of beauty and elegance did not change in this gilded world; hemlines could go anywhere, but the codes represented remained intact. They understood the symbolism and luxury of it all. No logos needed, thank you! That was vulgar, tasteless and nouveau. After all, as Minal Modi (wife of former IPL chairman Lalit Modi) once said, "My hand, and not the logo, will tell me if a bag is luxury when I slip it in. It knows what makes the cut."

It is in this world that Valentino lived and flourished. Schooled in Paris, the Italian became one of its pillars. He started his brand with businessman Giancarlo Giammetti, who became his partner in every way, and they nourished it long past the end of their personal relationship. That, I found amazing. It spoke of the finest value system: honour, regard, and respect.

Impeccable, but classical

I was staying at a friend's penthouse in Manhattan this past summer, directly opposite Giammetti's, and we went across to take a look at it. It could have been done by Valentino; their taste had become one. (In his five homes, you would see Chinese antiques on leopard print carpets, walls done in horn, and he had more than 130 extravagant dinner sets.) It was exquisite, Italian and modern. Valentino loved beauty.

That is what Valentino stood for. Much as we look at Italy and think of Rococo and Baroque, great Italian style has been modern, synthesising many worlds with functionality.

I came into the design world by the late 90s. I grew up in an India that was socialist and did not take the traditional route in, rather sliding sideways, with a father (an Admiral) who was perplexed as to why I wanted to be a tailor. By the time I was conscious of Valentino's work and attended a few couture shows with (British magazine editor) Isabella Blow, I found it impeccable – the use of his 'Valentino red', for instance, was a strong, sexy, modern signature – but too classical.

However, when he decided to retire and hand the mantle over to his former accessory designers Pierpaolo Piccioli and Maria Grazia Chiuri (who later went on to be the creative director at Dior), I found a new magic. Actually, that is when I became a fan of the brand. What Piccioli and Chiuri produced in the last 15 years, together and individually, was spectacular. It honoured all the house codes, but it made them modern. And Valentino was always at the shows, giving them his blessing. He understood the times.

With unexpected lightness

When his mentor passed away last week, my friend Piccioli posted a small ode on Instagram. It says so much in just a few words: "Around me there will be immaculate order, yet I will know that behind such precision lived an unexpected lightness. An almost innocent brilliance, as though every idea were always the first, as though wonder had never faded. That is what made everything possible, and magical. For you, beauty was never a luxury nor an ornament: it was a form of defence, a place of safety, the only one possible. A protection, a shield against the world. You were my mentor without ever needing a lectern; you had no need of one. You taught me that fashion is joy, though a profoundly serious kind of joy. You created an eternity, a place made of dream and beauty. There, death does not exist, because it is unnecessary. It is a place that will remain, for me, for everyone, forever." Valentino also taught him how to make the "most beautiful bows in the world", Piccioli added.

What more can I add? May we all be so lucky to be inspired to live lives that can have the same qualitative commitment. Even in this, Valentino, the 'Last Emperor', left us with an enduring legacy of a life worth emulating. And I am always grateful for that.

The writer is an Indian couturier renowned for his embroideries and drapes.

At the Academy Awards

Valentino's designs were red carpet regulars. The Academy Awards saw quite a few, from the vintage black-and-white velvet and tulle gown that Julia Roberts picked up her 2001 award in, to Jennifer Lopez's pastel mint kaftan-style gown inspired by a dress worn by the late Jackie Kennedy. Scarlett Johansson's curve-hugging red gown from 2006, and Anne Hathaway's ornate couture gown (from Fall 2002) that she wore in 2011 when she walked the Oscar red carpet with Valentino.

GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty

ALL IN A DAY IN COASTAL INDIA
VADHVAN
FELLOW CITIZENS, PLEASE STAND UP AGAINST A PORT THAT WILL DESTROY OUR ECOLOGY, FISH STOCKS AND LIVELIHOODS.
SAVE VADHVAN
PROTECT OUR RIGHTS
HONNAVAR
FELLOW CITIZENS, PLEASE STAND UP AGAINST A PORT THAT WILL DESTROY OUR ECOLOGY, FISH STOCKS AND LIVELIHOODS.
SAVE HONNAVAR
PROTECT OUR RIGHTS
KENI
FELLOW CITIZENS, PLEASE STAND UP AGAINST A PORT THAT WILL DESTROY OUR ECOLOGY, FISH STOCKS AND LIVELIHOODS.
SAVE KENI
PROTECT OUR RIGHTS
MUMBAI
POMFRET ISN'T AVAILABLE? NEVER MIND. WE'LL HAVE THE NORWEGIAN SALMON.
Rohan

Gautami Reddy

Ahead of her Kochi-Muziris Biennale lecture, the performance-art pioneer reflects on India and why art must still ask dangerous questions

MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ
ART OF ENDURANCE

Marina Abramović (left); and *Waterfall* by Abramović, a three-channel video projection, at the Kochi-Muziris Biennale 2025-26. ©MARCO ANELLI; COURTESY OF THE MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ ARCHIVES 2000-2003

Along Serbian face, an unflinching stare, lips that seem to hold back more than they release, Marina Abramović is a presence that stills a room. Now entering her 80th year, she is often described as the "grandmother of performance art", shorthand for a career spent using her own body as both medium and method, repeatedly testing how much a human being can endure, physically, psychologically and emotionally.

Abramović, whose works are featured in the sixth Kochi-Muziris Biennale, will be in Kerala for a lecture this month. The lecture, *The Past, Present, and Future of Performance Art*, will reflect on her career and how performance art has evolved as a form. Another body of work of hers will be presented by Saatchi Yates, the London-based gallery, at the India Art Fair in New Delhi.

Abramović emerged in the 1970s with confrontational works that dismantled the passive role of the viewer. In *Rhythm 0* (1974), she stood motionless for six hours while the public was invited to use 72 objects on her body, from a feather to a loaded gun, exposing how quickly spectators could become complicit in violence when authority went unchecked.

In the 1980s, working with her partner Ulay, the work shifted towards emotional endurance. In *The Lovers* (1988), the pair walked from opposite ends of the Great Wall of China to meet in the middle and end their relationship.

The 1990s marked a turn towards history and collective trauma. In *Balkan Baroque* (1997), presented at the Venice Biennale, Abramović scrubbed bloody cow bones while singing folk songs, responding to the wars that followed the breakup of Yugoslavia.

By the 2010s, extremity had given way to stillness. In *The Artist Is Present* (2010), staged at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), she sat silently for nearly three months, meeting the gaze of visitors who often left in tears, anger, or quiet confession.

Less often acknowledged is how deeply her practice has been shaped by disciplines beyond western art history. Over decades, Abramović studied Aboriginal culture in Central Australia and Tibetan Buddhist practices in monasteries across India, absorbing rituals of repetition, fasting, meditation and endurance.

During one extended visit, she recorded Tibetan monks chanting the *Lotus Sutra* (one of the most venerated sutras of Mahayana Buddhism). In *Waterfall* (2003), a monumental installation (a multi-channel, 18m-wide video projection) now on view at the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, their voices and faces are layered into a continuous cascade, creating a calming atmosphere for those who sit in its presence.

Alongside it, the Marina Abramović Institute is presenting an archive of films, drawings and performances since its founding in 2007.

In an email interview ahead of her visit, Abramović reflects on India as a spiritual teacher, and on why, in what she describes as a moment of cultural exhaustion, she believes art can still point towards a future. Excerpts:

Question: *What has India meant to you personally, artistically, and spiritually?*
Answer: Personally, India has been a great teacher. It has helped me understand the temporality of our existence on this planet. Artistically, it holds an extraordinarily complex historical and cultural heritage; it's an endless source of inspiration and learning for my practice. Spiritually, India helped me connect mind and body, and to understand compassion, forgiveness, and the karmic circle of life.

Q: *Do you remember your first encounter with the country?*
A: Very clearly. My first trip to India was in 1979, when I landed in Delhi. All I wanted was to go immediately to Bodh Gaya, the site where Siddhartha Gautama [Buddha] is believed to have attained enlightenment under the Bodhi Tree. I spent three months there.

Bodh Gaya then was fascinating: full of temples, teachings, meditation centres, ceremonies, and teachers offering seminars constantly. It was one of the key global meeting points for Buddhist practitioners from Tibet, Southeast Asia, and the West in the decades following the Tibetan diaspora.

After that first journey, I returned to India many times, travelling and staying in monasteries throughout the country, particularly in Himalayan regions. I call these research trips. I came to learn through lived practice, connection and experience rather than belief alone.

Q: *After more than five decades of performance, what has the body taught you about being human?*
A: Living a long life has benefits, you have time to collect wisdom. I learnt how to live in the present, here and now. The body is where knowledge accumulates, not just the mind.

Q: *Performance art is often described as western in origin. How do you see its future now?*
A: Western culture is exhausted. It's essential to have fresh points of view, which other cultures can bring. Performance will never die. It constantly changes, like a phoenix, burning and being reborn from its own ashes. The only thing I know for sure is that Instagram is not art.

Q: *What does it mean for you to be a part of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, under Nikhil Chopra's curation?*
A: I met Nikhil Chopra when I was curating *Marina Abramović Presents* in Manchester in 2009. It was a major exhibition dedicated to performance art, bringing together artists whose practices demanded sustained physical and mental commitment from both performer and viewer. Nikhil presented a live performance that unfolded over several days. He stayed in the space for long stretches of time, dressed as a character, slowly drawing large charcoal self-portraits. Visitors could come and go, watching the work change day by day. I discovered a talented, charismatic artist and a compelling performer. One of the main reasons I accepted this invitation is that it is being curated by him, an artist.

Q: *In a world that feels increasingly unstable, what role must art play?*
A: I don't make sense of the world we're living in, and I don't think anyone truly can. Art has to be the oxygen of our lives. It feeds our spirit. Art must lift human spirits but also ask the right questions. Some great art can even predict the future.

Q: *What advice would you give young artists now?*
A: Follow your heart. Be true to yourself. Don't compromise for the art market. Don't overproduce.

Q: *And finally, what keeps you hopeful?*
A: Life is a miracle. We should live fully every day and be happy to be a part of this cosmic play.

Marina Abramović will deliver a lecture on February 10, from 6-8 p.m., at the Kochi-Muziris Biennale. The venue (Fort Kochi or Willingdon Island) and ticket details will be announced soon on the Biennale website.

The interviewer specialises in reporting on art, design and architecture.

Also showing at IAF

Saatchi Yates debuts at India Art Fair (Feb. 5-8, NSIC Grounds, Okhla, Delhi) with a Marina Abramović presentation drawn from her Video Portrait series (1975–2002). Two iconic performance videos, Red Period and Blue Period, are fragmented into 100 photographic stills, forming a wall installation viewers move through frame by frame. Invoking Picasso's Blue Period and Matisse's Red, Abramović treats colour as a psychological state: red as sensuous, blue as pain, a pointed, feminist move to carve space for herself inside an art history.

(Clockwise from right) George Clooney-Brad Pitt in *Ocean's Eleven*; Joe Pesci-Robert De Niro in *The Irishman*; and Ben Affleck-Matt Damon in *The Rip*.

BINGE WATCH

Long live the bros

From Damon-Affleck to De Niro-Pesci, bromances have always thrived in Hollywood

Joe Carnahan's latest action thriller *The Rip* (on Netflix) stars Hollywood A-listers Matt Damon and Ben Affleck as Dane Dumars and J.D. Byrne, respectively – police officers in a narcotics unit in Miami.

The two begin to second-guess themselves and the motivations of their team members, after they discover upwards of $20 million in cash stashed away in a recently-deceased senior citizen's attic. *The Rip* seldom tries to reinvent the trope. Its array of double-crosses, flashbacks, secret phones and well-shot action set-pieces keep the story moving along nicely.

What it focuses on instead is extracting every last bit of mileage from the chemistry between Affleck and Damon, childhood friends and long-time collaborators who burst on the scene in the late 90s with *Good Will Hunting* (1997), a feel-good coming-of-age drama.

In the game of paranoia that unfolds in *The Rip*, there are several moments where Damon and Affleck's characters confer in private. "Hey, it's just you and me, tell me what's going on" or "No bullsh**, it's just us in here," – the duo is heard saying.

The plot too is designed to highlight the pleasures and tensions of a friendship between two middle-aged men who happen to work together – Dumars is leading the unit because the tempestuous Byrne was passed up for a promotion. Dumars lost his son to cancer a few years ago and has clearly not gotten over it yet, causing Byrne to treat him with kid gloves, at least at first. During a high-tension moment, when Byrne yells at Dumars, "Show me the tip!" (referring to an anonymous tip-off), the latter responds with a deadpan "Just the tip?". It's extremely male-coded humour but also, very relatable.

Fruitful partnership

Damon-Affleck is without a doubt the greatest modern-era bromance in Hollywood. Whether it's *Dogma* (1999), *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* (2001) or more recent collaborations like *The Last Duel* (2021), audiences and film critics alike have enjoyed watching these two actors in tandem. But they are by no means the only such A-list pairing in recent times.

George Clooney and Brad Pitt, whose bromance began with the iconic heist film *Ocean's Eleven* (2001), have since appeared together in the film's sequels, plus several other projects like the Coen Brothers dark comedy *Burn After Reading* (2008) and most recently, the action comedy *Wolfs* (2024).

Where the Damon-Affleck pairing is marked by an abrasive, masculine intensity and 'lad humour', the Clooney-Pitt pairing is usually marked by silver-tongued sophistication from both ends.

The 90s, which is when both of the aforementioned bromances began, were in the fact the beginning of many fruitful long-term partnerships in Hollywood – like Seth Rogen and James Franco, who first appeared together in the cult TV series *Freaks And Geeks* (1999), a high school drama developed by Judd Apatow. There were also Jackie Chan and Chris Tucker in the *Rush Hour* movies and Vin Diesel and Paul Walker in the *Fast and Furious* franchise.

The loser and the hero

Several gangster films too saw familiar pairings returning to the screen. Robert de Niro and Joe Pesci appeared in many such movies together, all directed by Martin Scorsese: *Goodfellas* (1990), *Casino* (1995) and most recently, *The Irishman* (2021). Pesci also acted alongside De Niro in the espionage thriller *The Good Shepherd* (2006), which was directed and produced by De Niro himself.

Not all of these bromances have withstood the test of time, of course. But the ones that have survived – like Damon-Affleck – have certain commonalities. A good on-screen bromance finds its ideal dynamic quickly and sticks to its variations: in the Damon-Affleck partnership, Affleck usually plays the "loser" character whereas Damon plays the all-American hero who tolerates his friend's eccentricities out of affection.

A good bromance is self-aware and unafraid to poke fun at itself – Damon-Affleck have done so several times, across multiple Kevin Smith meta-comedies where they have played exaggerated versions of themselves.

A good bromance, most of all, shows personal growth in both parties involved – *The Rip*, too, therefore, ends with a scene of peace and unhurried tranquillity, our heroes sharing a beachside sunrise over beer, having learnt a valuable lesson in trust, brotherhood and forgiveness.

***Aditya Mani Jha** is working on his first book of non-fiction.*

PERSON OF INTEREST

YOGITA BHAYANA: STARING DOWN DARKNESS

Meet the activist fighting against the epidemic of sexual violence in India

Yogita Bhayana is the founder of People Against Rape in India (PARI).

Yogita Bhayana, 45, is the *sutradhaar* (narrator) of the endless horror that Indian girls and women relive every day. Her X timeline jumps from one rape to the next, each more brutal, each victim younger, telling a story about this country that most prefer to ignore.

As a social activist and founder of People Against Rape in India (PARI), Bhayana urges women to rise against intimate partner violence and street assaults. In a country where 81 women report rapes daily (National Crime Records Bureau, 2023), most by known men, Bhayana dreams the impossible dream of a rape-free India.

You've likely seen videos of police dragging her during a protest at India Gate with the 2017 Unnao gang-rape survivor and her mother. This came after the Delhi High Court suspended former Bharatiya Janata Party MLA Kuldeep Singh Sengar's sentence for raping the then teenager; the Supreme Court soon stayed the order.

Nine years on, the survivor battles fresh trauma, fending off online attacks by Sengar's daughters and their supporters, who she says exposed her identity. Bhayana's hands are full shielding and counselling her. "The courts are on our side," she reassures.

She's torn about where she should go next. Patna, where a teenage medical aspirant was assaulted and found dead in her hostel? Or Manipur, site of a 2023 ATM abduction, gang rape and torture that resulted in the death of the teenage survivor this month from complications? "I want to go to both places, but if I look in Delhi too, I will find many such cases," says Bhayana. She says she chases the cases everyone ignores.

I wonder aloud if she ever tires of the relentless advocacy. Of course, she says. "I feel frustrated, exhausted, I don't feel in the game. I feel like giving up multiple times," says Bhayana. "I don't know in which direction to run."

Assisting the family

Most of us look away from the lives of the marginalised but Bhayana is what she is today because she stopped when she saw an accident victim bleed out on the road in 2002. "The government hospital was an eye-opener, I saw the aloofness and attitude there. He died as I was begging them to attend to him," she recalls.

Bhayana helped the family fight for compensation and witnessed how society preys on the widow. "I was naive, I could not guide her," she adds.

Hospitals still make her angry and every time she visits one, she makes it a point to look around and see what people are going through, and if she can, help make their experience even a little better. "I go to the medical superintendent, I raise my voice, I can at least get a few people some help," she says.

After stints at Sahara and Kingfisher Airlines, Bhayana did a Masters in disaster management and volunteered for accident victims and hospital reforms, learning to speak up on the job. She's currently a third-year law student because the pro bono lawyers she uses sometimes let her down.

Helping children in need

When she volunteered with the National Commission for Women (NCW), travelling to the Hindi heartland in the run-up to the gang rape of 23-year-old physiotherapy intern Jyoti Singh in Delhi in 2012, she didn't fully comprehend the extent of violence that women faced. "It's only when I protested after the Nirbhaya rape, sitting constantly at Jantar Mantar, that I started getting calls non-stop from women," she says. After the incident, she quit the NCW to protest against the government, morphing into an activist who spoke against the establishment. That's also when she founded PARI.

Back then, she protested outside the juvenile jail with Singh's mother as one of her daughter's rapists, a minor, was due to be released. The women demanded the Rajya Sabha pass a pending Bill that would lower the juvenile age threshold from 18 to 16 years for children accused of 'heinous' offences. Critics said it was passed to appease a society that couldn't take responsibility for its children who commit crimes.

Since then, Bhayana has helped many, prioritising POCSO cases of children, the toughest fights. She's a repository for the lost dreams of girls. "Someone wanted to be a doctor, someone was just happy being a girl," she says. "When I hear these stories from the families of those who are no more, I come home blank, I don't talk to anyone for days."

One 2007 government survey across 13 States estimated that 53.22% of children faced sexual abuse. Bhayana says the reality is worse. "Nine out of 10 girls are abused, five out of 10 boys," she says. "Most are not reported, nobody talks about them. It's only when there is an injury or a medical emergency that they come to light."

Bhayana takes frequent breaks to stay sane, leaning on food, friends and travel for comfort. She's just started a hashtag tracking politicians who don't take sexual violence seriously, like the Karnataka Congress leader who dismissed rape as a 'small incident'. She asks her followers to pledge that they will not vote for such politicians.

And as she waits for more Indian women to speak up and for the state and societal infrastructure around them to improve so they can exit abusive relationships, she directs her energy to advocacy and prevention – relentlessly.

***Priya Ramani** is a Bengaluru-based journalist and the co-founder of India Love Project on Instagram.*

GOREN BRIDGE

Know your percentages

Both vulnerable, North deals

Bob Jones

Today's deal illustrates why good players, or players who want to be good, invest some time into learning some of the basic bridge percentages. It is not that complicated, and it does not take a math 'whiz', it just takes a little time and effort. Any activity worth your time deserves a little effort.

East wins the opening trump lead with his ace and shifts to a low spade. West wins with the ace and shifts to a diamond. Should declarer take the diamond finesse or rise with the ace and hope for four tricks from the club suit? The chance for a successful diamond finesse is 50%. The chance for the six missing clubs to split 3-3 is 36%. So we should take the diamond finesse, right? Not so fast. There is also a chance for the doubleton jack of clubs to fall - an additional 16% chance. It's a coin flip now. There is also an 8% chance that West will have five or more clubs, making a finesse for the jack a sure thing. That makes the club suit about a 60% chance to provide four tricks. Rise with the ace of diamonds!

Unless you want to go out and conquer the tournament world, knowing the exact percentages is not necessary. Rounding them off into numbers that are easy to remember will usually be enough.

NORTH
♠ 10 7
♡ J 6 5
◇ A Q J 5
♣ A Q 9 7

WEST
♠ A 5 4 2
♡ 9 8 4
◇ 10 8 3
♣ 6 4 2

EAST
♠ K 9 8 6
♡ A 2
◇ K 9 7 6
♣ J 5 3

SOUTH
♠ Q J 3
♡ K Q 10 7 3
◇ 4 2
♣ K 10 8

The bidding:

NORTH	EAST	SOUTH	WEST
1◇	Pass	1♡	Pass
2♡	Pass	3♡	Pass
4♡	All pass		

Opening lead: Four of ♡

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

True stories behind books

Berty Ashley

1 On February 1, 1709, Alexander Selkirk, a Scottish sailor, was finally rescued by William Dampier. He had been marooned on an uninhabited island in the South Pacific for four years and four months, surviving by making his own tools. This inspired English writer Daniel Defoe to write which book that is considered to be the first English 'novel'?

2 Joseph Heller, a U.S. Army pilot, took part in bombing raids on Italy during World War II. He initially felt heroic, but later showed symptoms that we now know as PTSD. He started writing his experiences down, and it led to a satirical war novel, which led to a term meaning 'a dilemma from which there is no escape'. What book did he write?

3 Richard Cabell was a man in Dartmoor who had an evil reputation among the locals. On the night he died and was buried, legend has it that a pack of large black dogs ran across the moor howling. A journalist shared this story with his friend Dr. A.C. Doyle, who was inspired to write a novel. Which novel brought back to life a famous detective?

4 Charles Dodgson was a mathematician who made up silly stories for his friend's daughters. Ten-year-old Alice Liddell loved it and asked him to write it all down. He named it after her and called it her 'adventures under ground'. What book did this eventually become?

When Harper submitted her manuscript, publishers said she was new and needed guidance. She started writing another book inspired by her father, Amasa Lee. (GETTY IMAGES)

5 When Harper submitted her manuscript, publishers said she was new and needed guidance. She started writing another book inspired by her father, Amasa Lee. He was an attorney who was unsuccessful in defending an African-American father and son on charges of murder. What was the book she wrote, the novel she published in 1960 and was known for most of her life?

6 Herman started work on a whaling ship at the age of 19, where he met William Chase. He gave Herman a book by his father about a terrifying ordeal at sea. In 1839, there was a news article about Mocha Dick, a white whale which swam near Chile. Bringing all this together, what iconic book did Herman write?

7 This mystery writer was on the train home to London from Iraq after accompanying her husband to an excavation. She observed all her fellow travellers and their activities. She also read the news of the kidnapping and murder of Charles Lindbergh's son. Who was the author and what popular book did she write bringing all these together?

8 From the age of 11, Louisa maintained a journal on what she and her sister were up to at home. As an adult, she worked in a hospital during the American Civil War, where she entertained patients with skits. She eventually brought together all these experiences into which book, that became an immediate success? Name the book.

9 R.L. Stevenson enjoyed the company of Eugene Chantrelle Eugene Chantrelle whose company he enjoyed for many years. In May 1878, Eugene was accused and found guilty of poisoning his wife after taking out an insurance policy on her. A few years later, wanting to bring out the duality of man's personality, what novel did Stevenson write?

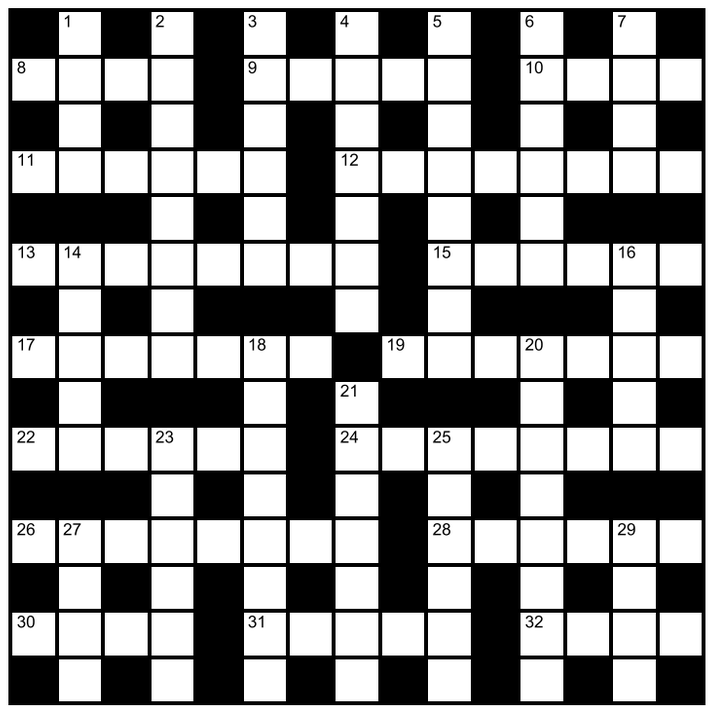
10 At the age of 19, Mary Godwin was spending a stormy summer in Geneva with her husband, Percy Bysshe Shelley. Their friend Lord Byron shared ghost stories in the evening, and she learnt about Volta's experiments with electricity. That night, she had a dream of a man using galvanism to bring a corpse to life. This led to her founding the science fiction genre with which novel?

A molecular biologist from Madurai, our quizmaster enjoys trivia and music, and is working on a rock ballad called 'Coffee is a Drink, Kaapi is an Emotion'. @bertyashley

Answers

1. *Robinson Crusoe*
2. *Catch-22*
3. *The Hound of the Baskervilles*
4. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*
5. *To Kill a Mockingbird*
6. *Moby Dick*
7. *Agatha Christie's Murder on the Orient Express*
8. *Little Women*
9. *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*
10. *Frankenstein*

***THE HINDU* SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 41** (Set by Incognito)



Across

8 Crazy about one female employee (4)
9 Dress, with love, for actress (5)
10 Setter returns American birds (4)
11 Bird follows Indian Navy trainee (6)
12 Find yeti running and recognise (8)
13 Guess site team is confused (8)
15 Insect from centre of apple covered by torn shirt (6)
17 Butter spread around tip of pipe in lab equipment (7)
19 Very active police department returns and captures many going back (7)
22 Shed mad rage after pocketing silver (6)
24 Prepare to shoot reel about male bird (8)
26 Perfect female having no rules (8)
28 Can't Arjuna bleed to some extent? (6)
30 Unrestrained party may be gory (4)
31 What volcanoes may do, shaking Peru at end of night? (5)
32 Dash during plane landing (4)

Down

1 Threaten conflict is accompanied by destruction in the end (4)
2 Damaged sieve had sticky substance (8)
3 Time at National Defence Academy for things to be considered in meeting (6)
4 Went round old ring leader and sank teeth into Edward (7)
5 City group of witches attempt (8)
6 Superior gambler (6)
7 Polish aficionado in the nude (4)
14 Puts up a domed hemispherical structure (5)
16 First rate set up (5)
18 Moved unsteadily from Peg at beginning of the estate road with editor (8)
20 Means "Asserts about time elapsed from birth" (8)
21 Mimes "Cats" (4,3)
23 Say, "Law is changed for all times" (6)
25 Makes a tally of noblemen (6)
27 Bird nesting in Kolar, Karnataka (4)
29 Guide metal wire (4)

SOLUTION NO. 40

M	I	S	T	A	K	E	S	■	I	B	I	D	E	M
I	■	A	■	W	■	L	■	R	■	R	■	W	■	U
G	E	N	O	A	■	B	A	E	D	E	K	E	R	S
H	■	M	■	R	■	E	■	D	■	A	■	E	■	K
T	R	A	C	E	S	■	S	H	A	K	A	B	L	E
■	■	R	■	■	■	S	■	A	■	F	■	■	■	T
C	H	I	E	F	■	P	I	N	E	A	P	P	L	E
A	■	N	■	U	■	U	■	D	■	S	■	O	■	E
R	I	O	G	R	A	N	D	E	■	T	R	I	E	R
P	■	■	■	N	■	S	■	D	■	■	■	N	■	■
E	M	E	R	I	T	U	S	■	S	T	A	T	E	S
N	■	X	■	T	■	G	■	O	■	U	■	S	■	I
T	R	I	B	U	N	A	L	S	■	T	R	O	L	L
R	■	T	■	R	■	R	■	L	■	O	■	U	■	O
Y	E	S	M	E	N	■	S	O	C	R	A	T	E	S

The national sport after a sporting loss

The parsing of the result of a game is, after all, the consistent post-match performance in India

Thomas Paul
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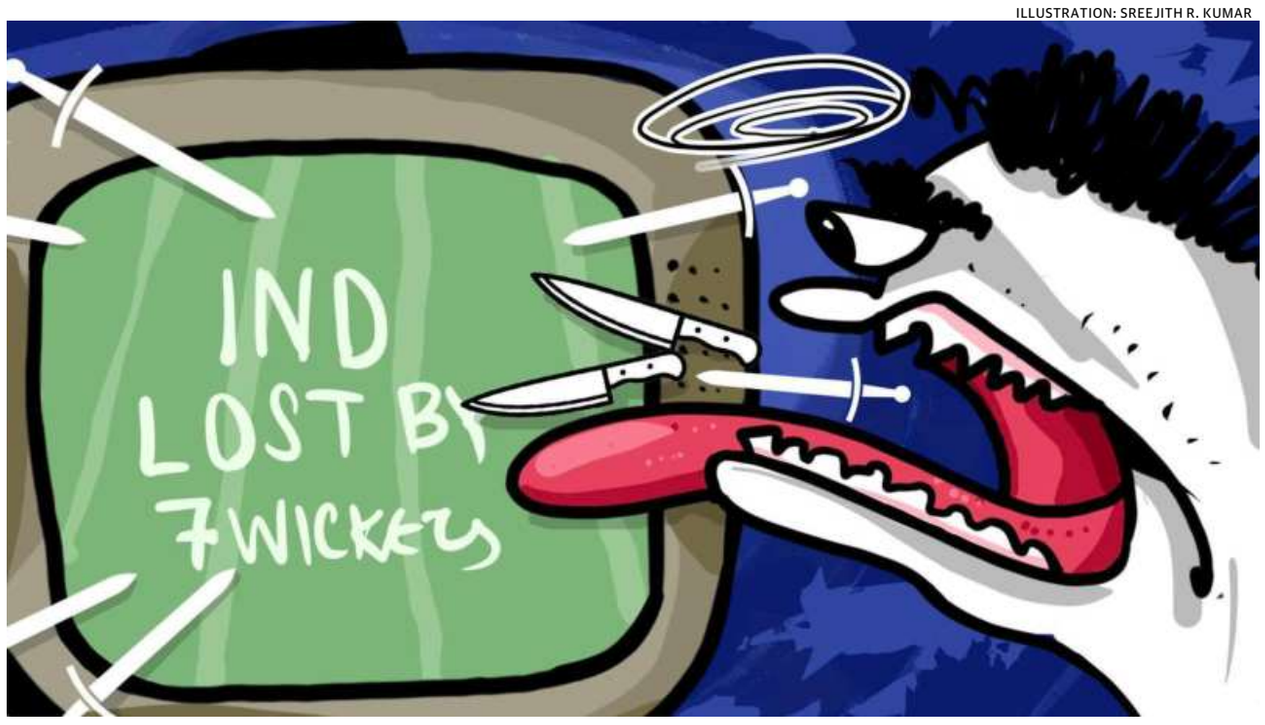
ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR



The moment a team loses, the real game begins.

The scoreboard may indicate defeat by seven wickets, but that is merely the trailer. The best part is the explanation phase, a carefully choreographed national ritual involving team managers, expert commentators, former players, psychologists, astrologers, and that one uncle who last played cricket in 1978 but has very strong views.

In theory, sports is simple. One team wins, the other loses. In practice – especially in India – defeat is unacceptable unless accompanied by several prime-time debates, and sage pronouncements that deliver technicalities-filled sound bites while explaining nothing.

The team manager defends the rout by selecting from his standard phrase book. Blinking in slow motion, he says, "We gave it our 100%." That is comforting, because the alternative would be alarming. He may also mention "conditions", a mysterious force that appears only after defeats and never during victories.

Next come the expert commentators who had earlier confidently predicted victory as though they had access to some privileged information. Undeterred by this minor detail, they now explain that the loss was inevitable due to "poor shot selection", "lack of temperament", and "failure to handle pressure" – all of which become visible only with hindsight, much like potholes after your suspension breaks.

Then arrive the sports authorities who form committees, without which no loss can be complete. The committee will "review the performance", "identify gaps", and "submit a report", which will be forgotten entirely by the next tournament.

Meanwhile, two full pages are devoted to post-match interviews, photographs of dejected players staring meaningfully into the middle distance, and charts explaining where it all went wrong. There will be arrows, circles, and maps, all proving conclusively that if only Player X had stood three inches to the left, history would have changed.

Patriotic fervour

In India, cricket is indistinguishable from hardcore patriotism. Supporting the team and defending national pride are so close that even the third umpire can't spot the difference."When the team wins, we say, "We did it." When the team loses, we say, "They betrayed us." Flags are waved, players are trolled, and metaphors involving war are deployed. Netizens, who were distributing virtual garlands just a season ago, now unsheathe their keyboards. The coach, previously hailed as a visionary, becomes clueless overnight. The captain, once compared to ancient kings and modern CEOs, is now unfit to lead a neighbourhood carrom tournament. Memes are generated at industrial scale. Resignations are demanded. Childhood photos of players are scrutinised for early signs of incompetence.

It is a remarkable transformation – heroes to *persona non grata* in under 24 hours. If only our bureaucracy moved at this speed.

What is most fascinating is the emotional investment. Blood pressure rises and falls in sync with run rates. Dinner tastes worse after a collapse. Sleep is disturbed by that one dropped catch. All this for sportsmen who, it must be noted gently, are doing quite well financially and will recover from the trauma in air-conditioned comfort. Win or lose, the star players with advertisement contracts will eventually be laughing all the way to the bank, endorsing products they have no clue about.

So how should the average, tax-paying, BP-monitoring citizen handle defeat with equanimity? One option is to avoid the sports page entirely after a loss. Treat it like bad weather: acknowledge it exists, but don't step outside unnecessarily. Another is to resist the urge to break the TV screen, remembering that the TV did not miss the easy chance at slip.

A more sustainable approach is deep breathing. Inhale during the analysis, exhale during the justification. Repeat until the phrase "We'll come back stronger" no longer triggers rage.

Best of all, one can go philosophical. Sports, after all, is uncertainty made entertaining. If outcomes were guaranteed, we would not watch. Victory teaches us celebration; defeat teaches us restraint, humour, and occasionally the wisdom to log off.

And no, we should definitely not contemplate drastic measures over a game. If a loss feels life-altering, it may be time to switch channels, step outside, and remember that tomorrow the sun will rise, the newspapers will move on, and the same players will once again be heroes – just one win away. Until then, let the explanations flow. They are our most consistent post-match performance.

Overcoming stress and anxiety

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Someone asked a wise man, "Why are you so calm, as if nothing bothers you?" He replied, "Worrying never changes the outcome."

We can achieve nothing by worrying about the future. Despite the advice to live in the present and not worry about the past or the future, we often do so, resulting in disastrous consequences.

Stress and anxiety seem to be our companions since birth, when we come to this world naked, helpless, and crying.

Various religions have tried to help man to overcome stress and anxiety, which are said to be tests from God, by asking him to remain strong and courageous while facing them. They advise us to leave everything to God, who cares for us, and pray to Him to bring peace in our lives while facing hardships. No one's life is a bed of roses, and we are required to accept life's reality and address problems with the available resources. To make the struggle easier, we must seek support from others, not isolating ourselves out of ego.

Detachment, selfless action, mindfulness, and devotion to God are also considered antidotes to stress and anxiety. A balanced life is essential for the mind's control and inner peace. We must focus on duty and accept success and failure. It is advisable to meditate to achieve equanimity.

Our attachment to results and clinging to what we like while pushing away what we dislike causes stress and anxiety. Non-acceptance of reality destabilises the mind. At the same time, we have to learn to let go of control and accept what life brings.

Most of us are such pessimists that we forgo the present pleasures by imagining a bad future. There have been cases where people have died when bitten by non-poisonous snakes, but the victim was sure that the snake was poisonous. Hospitals are full of patients with diseases like heart attacks caused by stress and anxiety. It is a matter of concern that the number of people who are free from stress is rapidly decreasing.

The timeless voice that still wins hearts

When society feels divided, radio becomes a quiet thread of unity, carrying shared words and melodies

Narayanan Kizhumundayur
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Like a river that never dries, radio continues its flow. Long before shining screens took over our attention and before mobile alerts filled every hour, radio was the gentle voice that greeted us in the morning and comforted us at night. It entered our homes like an unseen companion, bringing music, news, stories, and hope. Its charm was invisible, yet it linked distant villages to busy cities, farmers to leaders,

ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

and lonely hearts to the wider world.

The beauty of radio lies not just in its invention but in the closeness it creates. Television demands our eyes, and smartphones trap our hands, but radio asks only for an ear – and a little space in the heart. A soft crackle becomes a familiar voice, a song, a message. In a silent room, that single voice can feel warmer than a crowd. We do not watch radio; we experience it. It fills our imagination in ways no screen can copy.

Even in the fast digital age, radio has not faded. Its role may have changed, but its value remains steady. During disasters, when electricity fails and screens go dark, the small transistor still glows bravely. It carries warnings, comfort, and courage. On long highways, the car radio becomes a steady companion, turning lonely miles into lighter moments. In kitchens, workshops, and tiny roadside shops, radio adds rhythm, laughter, and information to life.

Democratic spirit

What makes radio truly special is its democratic spirit. It does not demand money, literacy, or expensive gadgets. A farmer resting under a banyan tree hears the same news as a professor. A mother humming a lullaby catches the same tune that millions listen to. In its invisible waves, equality quietly thrives. Radio has always been the theatre of the mind, where listeners paint their own pictures and become part of the storytelling.

Radio endures because it adapts. From the dignified voice of All India Radio that once carried speeches into every home, to the lively talk of today's FM shows that brighten city mornings, radio has changed with time but never lost its spirit. And above all, radio continues to offer companionship. When hearts grow weary, it gives a song. When minds are curious, it offers knowledge. When society feels divided, radio becomes a quiet thread of unity, carrying shared words and melodies into places that may differ in language, culture, or belief.

The tender wonder

A tiny tot is the most natural stress reliever life has invented

C.S. Krishnamurthy
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The softest burdens rest the heaviest on the heart. Nothing proves this more beautifully than the moment one carries a baby. Each time I lift a little one, the world around me seems to take a deep breath and slow its pace. The clock forgets its duty, my thoughts stop quarrelling with one another, and a strange peace arrives, as if on tiptoe. A tiny tot wrapped in cotton and innocence becomes the most natural stress reliever life has invented.

The art of holding a baby, I realised, begins even before the arms rise. My steps soften, my voice settles into a whisper, and something within reminds me that tenderness is a language best spoken quietly. The infant, warm and plump, fits into the flex of my arm with an ease that makes me believe nature rehearsed this pose for centuries. Elders joke that babies bring their own geometry, and I have never doubted it. There is music in this act. A little head resting on my shoulder, a cheek brushing mine, and the faint scent of talcum powder mingling with hope. Even the most serious face melts into an involuntary smile. Psychologists call it oxytocin – the cuddle or the feel-good bonding hormone. Grandmothers simply call it magic.

Whether the baby is ours or borrowed from a neighbour for a few minutes, the heart returns softer and the world suddenly seems easier to handle. And yet, what a contrast life creates. The tender, trusting infant slowly becomes the adult who guards feelings, doubts intentions, and sometimes forgets wonder. Innocence, once pure as morning light, learns caution. How marvellous that nature begins every life with softness, only to let the world slowly sculpt it into complexity. What a mystery. What a design. What a nature.

magazine

WORDS AGAINST THE DIVIDE

FEEDBACK

Letters to the *Magazine* can be e-mailed separately to mag.letters@thehindu.co.in by Tuesday 3 p.m.

Cover story

Literature festivals highlight the urgent need for unity in these fractured times, bringing authors together as bridges between differences. ('Words against the divide'; Jan. 25) Through conversations, readings, and respectful debates, writers challenge prejudice and encourage listening over judgment.
N.S. Reddy

As Shashi Tharoor observes, no matter how you define yourself, you are a minority somewhere in this vast subcontinent. That is why it is essential to uphold the right standards. In our highly polarised world, literature festivals remain one of the last spaces where meaningful conversations are possible and diverse beliefs can be understood.
.
S. Sundareswara Pandiyan

India's celebrated literary festivals are where authors, thinkers and artists find the perfect forum to air their views and indulge in free and frank discussions. Many writers flock to these festivals which also provide avid readers an opportunity to interact with their favourite authors.
C.V. Aravind

Respect traditions

The indiscriminate blending of sacred and profane elements in social media is obnoxious, disrespectful and unacceptable. ('Theyyam in the age of Reels'; Jan. 25) In traditional performances like Theyyam, divine manifestations require strict maintenance of boundaries. Theyyam performers are different from ordinary actors in a play.
N. Rama Rao

The article highlights the insensitivity of content creators. They unintentionally disregard the values and ethics each culture upholds. Understanding the significance of rituals, regardless of geographical boundaries, is of paramount importance. Before planning content and photography, they should learn about the sanctity of the rituals and give due respect to the religious practice.
Sajna Hameed

Word play

The new 'Tricktionary' word has left me totally perplexed. ('This 'early adopter' has had enough'; Jan. 25) Am I a 'mainstreamist' or am I not? Going by the definition, I seem to be a mixture of both. I have never hesitated from trying new things in life. Whether I like it or not is an entirely different cup of latte. The obvious question before me is: to be or not to be?
Deepak Taak

Kindness goes a long way

Phuphee's (now we know her name, Tahira, pure at heart and ready to help others, true to her name) advice to beat despair by being kind to others and to keep doing it is an excellent solution that always works ('Carrying on in an unkind world'; Jan. 25). The joy that comes from these acts of kindness is only matched by the smiles that one receives in return. As someone once said, "True kindness is being kind to the self and others."
Kosaraju Chandramouli

MORE ON THE WEB

www.thehindu.com/opinion/open-page

Redefining retirement in an age of longevity
The longevity paradox demands humans redefine retirement not as obsolescence, but reinvention
N. Anand Venkatesh

Getting over screen addiction
Follow the simple method of making screen use demand-driven
Ram Krishna Sinha

The power of being consistent
It reflects seriousness of intent; it signals how deeply we desire an outcome
Sathiya Lakshmi E.

Time, technology, and mind
The extra hour created by convenience did not become rest; it became an obligation
Tejaswini Sugumaran

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MYCELIUM TO MIYAWAKI FORESTS AT IAF 2026

Artists at the 17th edition of India Art Fair are moving away from romanticised nature to highlight the stressed realities of today

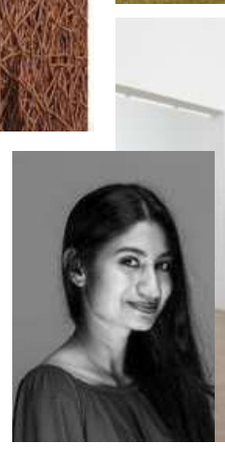
Nidhi Gupta

Dumiduni Illangasinghe has always been "very serious about mushrooms" – just not in the way you'd imagine a 29-year-old to be. From the rain-washed fields of Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka where she grew up, to the forests of the Banaras Hindu University where she is currently studying, the artist has made the fungi her primary subject of observation. In the fragility and endurance of mycelial networks, she reads metaphysical lessons: specifically the Buddhist concept of "*anitya*" or impermanence.

At the India Art Fair 2026, where Illangasinghe is the first international artist in residence, she will present an installation titled *Soft Armours*, where she will turn broken glass bangles, traditionally considered harbingers of misfortune in South Asian societies, into delicate sculptures entwined with mycelial forms. "I want the viewer to see that broken bangles can also generate beauty, they can take on a new form and we can make new life with them," she explains.

This philosophical engagement with ecological systems reflects a broader shift among emerging artists at the fair's 17th edition (which, with 133 exhibitors from around the world, a star-studded speaker series, deeper engagement with design, and ever stronger IAF Parallel programmes, only gets larger in scope and strength each year).

According to director Jaya Asokan, this might be a sign of a generational reckoning. "What distinguishes these practices is their refusal of a romanticised return to 'nature'," she observes. "Instead, artists are engaging critically with stressed systems, agriculture, fungal networks, urban growth and extractive economies, through material experimentation and research-based approaches."



(Clockwise from far left) Raki Nikahetiya; *Forest II*; Aranyani Pavilion; Tara Lal; Kulpreet Singh; *Extinction Archival*; Dumiduni Illangasinghe; and *Soft Armours*. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

All reflective of the times and its very many conflicts.

Armed with pesticides and questions

In Patiala-based artist Kulpreet Singh's practice, the land itself becomes the medium. Singh's outdoor art project, titled *Extinction Archival*, comprises approximately 1,200 drawings of endangered and extinct species. While the list of subjects has only been growing since 2022 (when he began by Googling the IUCN Red List of Endangered Species), the works themselves reflect the slow process of the farmer: stubble ash sandwiched with rice paper, which is then painted over, dipped in pesticide, and punctured with laser-cut dots. "It's a commentary on all that is lost, all that is being polluted, and all that is stuck in between," says Singh, 40.

At 25, multidisciplinary artist Sidhant Kumar's work deliberately questions pastoral idealisations. "I've always wanted to challenge that idyllic definition of 'landscape' – the picture of greenery, clear water, bright sunlight, birds flying." As a recipient of the Prameya Art Foundation's DISCOVER 09 Award, Kumar will present his exhibit *Studies from a Quiet Harvest* – including a film, a statistical installation and photographs of him in performance in a cactus headgear – which emerged from long-term research at Ranhaula in Delhi, where migrant workers from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Jharkhand cultivate vegetables on a share-cropping basis. "It's not like they can't tell right from wrong," Kumar observes, noting that the farmers end up using contaminated water from the nearby Najafgarh drain. "There is a lack of resources. This show is also about how capitalistic forces compel us to do those things that we must to only survive."

Stressing climate optimism

Elsewhere, artists forego critique for a more solutions-based approach. Colombo-based artist and permaculture enthusiast Raki Nikahetiya, 42, goes beyond observation. His *Forest II*, an installation supported by Max Estates, will be a Miyawaki-method pocket forest containing 200 native Delhi and Aravalli species, enclosed in structures built from construction waste metal – a literal refuge fashioned from the detritus of development. "I wanted to create a space where people can go, sit down and listen to these potential future sounds [of birds and bees and leaves rustling with the breeze] of this place," he says.

The installation will eventually be replanted at a permanent Delhi location, sequestering carbon for decades while providing a habitat for birds, pollinators and soil fungi. Nikahetiya, who has been cultivating a permaculture forest in Sri Lanka, frames the work through what he calls "climate optimism". "There's a lot of anxiety with climate change, which is absolutely accurate, but there are potential ways of overcoming that."

This impulse towards making something regenerative from what remains animates Tara Lal's Aranyani Pavilion at Sunder Nursery as well (an IAF Parallel event). It is inspired by the sacred groves she has witnessed around India and the world. Merging ecology with public art through a bamboo structure clad with the invasive *lantana camara* wood, the pavilion illustrates the architectural possibilities of ecological liabilities. Atop the structure grow native and naturalised plants, including *elaichi*, jasmine and Ashoka trees. Within it, conversation around ecology and culture will flow for about 10 days, including a talk by environmental activist Vandana Shiva, before the entire pavilion moves to the Rajkumari Ratnavati Girls School outside Jaisalmer. "Instead of [the climate crisis] being something that pulls us down, we want to remind people of the emotional connection to our land," Lal, 47, explains.

Asokan notes that in these works, "ecology is framed as a physical network, one shaped by care, consideration, memory and resilience. Rather than simply pointing to collapse, these artists foreground adaptation, coexistence and alternative ecological futures, speaking from within complexity rather than distance".

Art of resistance

Even though the primary purpose of IAF is to present a marketplace and a meeting point, Asokan has seen how larger shifts in the world have impacted artistic produce in the last decade. "There has been a marked shift towards materiality and questions of identity, belonging and labour, often articulated through mixed-media and interdisciplinary practices," she says.

In response to AI and machine-led production, she's seen "artists and curators returning to hand-made processes, foregrounding craft, familiarity and intention". Galleries too are "taking greater curatorial risks, presenting research-driven and experimental practices rather than purely market-led selections".

This observation resonates when you listen to Singh talk about the same "*seva bhaav*" he brings to his practice. Or when you listen to Kumar talk about understanding his purpose as an artist, while still studying in Vadodara. "My job as an artist is about community building, and it rests in resistance," he reflects. "All I can try to do is arrest its speed [the end of nature as we know it] a little by spreading awareness."

India Art Fair will take place from February 5-8 at NSIC Exhibition Grounds, New Delhi.

The Mumbai-based independent journalist writes on culture, lifestyle and technology.

CAMP's *A Photogenetic Line* installation; and (below) co-founders Shaina Anand and Ashok Sukumaran.

How CAMP is reworking the rules

The Mumbai studio shows us through digital archives and surveillance art

Aastha D.

At a time when the future increasingly feels like a repetition of the past, the idea of "game changing" demands scrutiny. On social media, comparisons between 2026 and 2016 circulate with uneasy familiarity: from resurgent authoritarianism to culture wars, and identity politics over visibility and speech. It is precisely this anxiety that gives the Asia Society Arts Game Changer Awards their urgency.

Instituted by Asia Society India, the awards were conceived to recognise practices that have shifted how art is made, circulated, and understood across South Asia. The award's emphasis is deliberate: individual excellence, once the primary currency of cultural recognition, has revealed its limits in an increasingly unequal world shaped by infrastructure, technology, and access, necessitating collaboration across disciplines.

This year's awardees underline that shift. The 2026 cohort includes Sri Lankan artist Hema Shironi, whose textile-based practice stitches together post-war memory, Tamil identity, and anti-colonial resistance; Kulpreet Singh, a Punjab-based farmer-artist whose soot drawings emerge directly from agrarian crisis and climate catastrophe; Raghu Rai, whose six-decade photographic archive has shaped how India remembers itself; and CAMP (Critical Art and Media Practices), whose work spans film, surveillance, and open digital archives.

'Art as something to inhabit'

Among them, what makes CAMP's practice particularly fascinating is its irreverence for prescribed definitions of form, format, media, and art itself. Founded in Mumbai in 2007 by Shaina Anand and Ashok Sukumaran, the collaborative studio has spent nearly two decades working across moving-image practice, technological systems, pedagogy, and long-term public infrastructure. Their projects include Pad.ma, an open-access online archive of documentary footage, and Indiancine.ma, a collaboratively built database of Indian cinema that functions as both archive and research commons.

Neither platform operates as a neutral repository. As Anand puts it, "We said 'infrastructure' long before it became a word in art or anthropology. Within three months of starting CAMP, Pad.ma was launched, and it already brought together and belonged to a larger community than us."

What distinguishes CAMP's practice is not scale or novelty, but method. From the outset, they were responding to a specific set of conditions. In the mid-2000s, India's contemporary art market was expanding rapidly, absorbing visibility and capital, while documentary filmmakers faced shrinking exhibition spaces, limited distribution, and increasing censorship. "We came from a time when the Internet felt like a forest. A place to hide, organise, to build autonomously. We also assumed airwaves, electricity as free media, as commons," she explains.

Shaping how images circulate

Central to CAMP's thinking is a refusal to separate art from its conditions. Filmmaking, building archives, or intervening in surveillance systems are treated as artistic acts because they shape how images circulate and who gets to see them. "The work might take the form of filmmaking, or building an archive – but the method, the commitment, is art," says Anand. This position also explains CAMP's resistance to being framed as an "artist collective". The term, they argue, often replicates the logic of individual authorship under a shared name. Instead, they treat collaboration as an active process that is negotiated, strategic, and often risky.

Working with CCTV operators in the U.K., Palestinian families filming their own neighbourhoods in East Jerusalem (*Al Jaar Qabla al Daar*), sailors documenting life across the Indian Ocean (*From Gulf to Gulf to Gulf*), or residents reading Mumbai's skyline through poetry (*Bombay Tilts Down*), CAMP repeatedly asks: who controls the image, who benefits from access? "There are already millions of cameras in our cities. The artistic question isn't whether to bring another one, but to use what's already there to show something else," says Sukumaran. By repurposing surveillance technologies, allowing cameras to observe neighbourhood life rather than guard private property, they interrupt the logic of the panopticon.

A shared commitment

Their approach extends cautiously to newer technologies. Rather than embracing claims of inevitability around artificial intelligence, CAMP treats machine tools as situational: useful for translation, research, or archival labour when aligned with ethical intent, and resisted when they obscure accountability. "We don't accept the current use of any technology as its final destiny," notes Sukumaran.

In this light, the Asia Society awards function less as endorsement than as recognition of sustained risk. Placed alongside Shironi, Singh, and Rai, CAMP's practice reveals a shared commitment: art that stays close to lived conditions rather than abstract trends. To "game change" art, then, is not to predict the future, but to refuse its repetition. In a moment when the past threatens to return intact, CAMP's work insists on rebuilding the rules themselves.

The Awards will be presented on February 6 in New Delhi.

The essayist-educator writes on culture, and is founding editor of Proseterity *– a literary arts magazine.*

Printmaking in the age of AI

Georgina Maddox

At a time when Artificial Intelligence (AI) is posing a serious threat to creativity, printmaking is thumbing its nose at it. The artistic process that can trace its roots to 3000 BCE, has an inbuilt sense of mobility that is hard to silence. One of the reasons why it's having a moment in 2026. In Kolkata, the third edition of the Print Biennale is on at the Lalit Kala Akademi, featuring over 204 artists from across the globe. At Emami Art, *PURVAI* traces contemporary printmaking in Eastern India. And in Delhi, Dhoomimal Gallery is opening an exhibition titled *Print Age - The Art of Printmaking in the Age of AI Reproduction*, in conjunction with the India Art Fair, showcasing 156 original prints created by 80 artists, including Pablo Picasso, Anish Kapoor and Jyoti Bhatt.

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